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12 MAY 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. George Carroll
Assistant to the Vice President

SUBJECT : The Communist Build-up in
South Vietnam's Northern
I Corps

The attached memorandum contains a review of the background of the present build-up of North Vietnamese military forces in northernmost South Vietnam. It also sets forth the extent of the build-up and assesses the Communists' aims, strategy, and capability in that area.

/s/ R. J. Smith

R. J. SMITH
Deputy Director for Intelligence

Attachment: a/s

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(12 May 67)

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Department of Defense Cy 15

The Honorable Thomas L. Hughes, Director
Bureau of Intelligence and Research
Department of State Cy 16

SECRET

9 May 1967

MEMORANDUM TALKING PAPER

MEMORANDUM TITLE: The Communist Buildup in South Vietnam's Northern I Corps

1. This memo was requested by the Deputy Director of Current Intelligence who desired OCI's view on the current intentions and capabilities of the enemy in the area.
2. The memo describes the origin and motivation behind the Communist buildup, attributing the enemy's initial trans-DMZ move to a desire to exploit the Buddhist crisis. In discussing the current offensive of the North Vietnamese forces, the memo takes note of their new tactics and strategy which involve increased firepower, operation in small, hard to detect, elements, and the development of both an east-west and a north-south line of pressure against the allies.
3. The memo concludes that the primary current intention of the NVA units is to inflict substantial casualties on the allied forces, at the same time blocking any demonstrable allied progress toward winning the war in this sector which might be held up by the allies as a return on the friendly casualties. The ensuing stalemate, Hanoi probably estimates, will have a depressing affect on morale in the US. The North Vietnamese are apparently prepared to throw considerable manpower into the effort for the foreseeable future.
4. The memo probably should be given limited dissemination.

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*The Communist Build-up in South Vietnam's
Northern I Corps*

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11 May 1967

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
11 May 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Communist Build-up in South Vietnam's
Northern I Corps

Summary

Following their initial thrust south from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in mid-1966, regrouped and augmented North Vietnamese forces have opened a new campaign this year in northern I Corps using somewhat different tactics and strategy. Many of the troops involved have been told that the plan is to "liberate" Quang Tri and Thua Thien, but this does not seem to be the primary aim at present.

The North Vietnamese appear, rather, to regard the sector as highly suitable for a continued war of maneuver where occasional sharp encounters with allied forces are developed from well-prepared and reasonably defensible positions. This year they have spread their operations farther to the west along the DMZ and have also developed a north-south axis in the mountainous backbone of Quang Tri and Thua Thien designed to spread allied reaction forces out and increase the pressure on them. The availability of replacements and supplies nearby in the DRV and Laos is undoubtedly a prime consideration in this strategy, since it permits an expenditure of men and firepower that would be above Communist capabilities in any sustained campaign farther south.

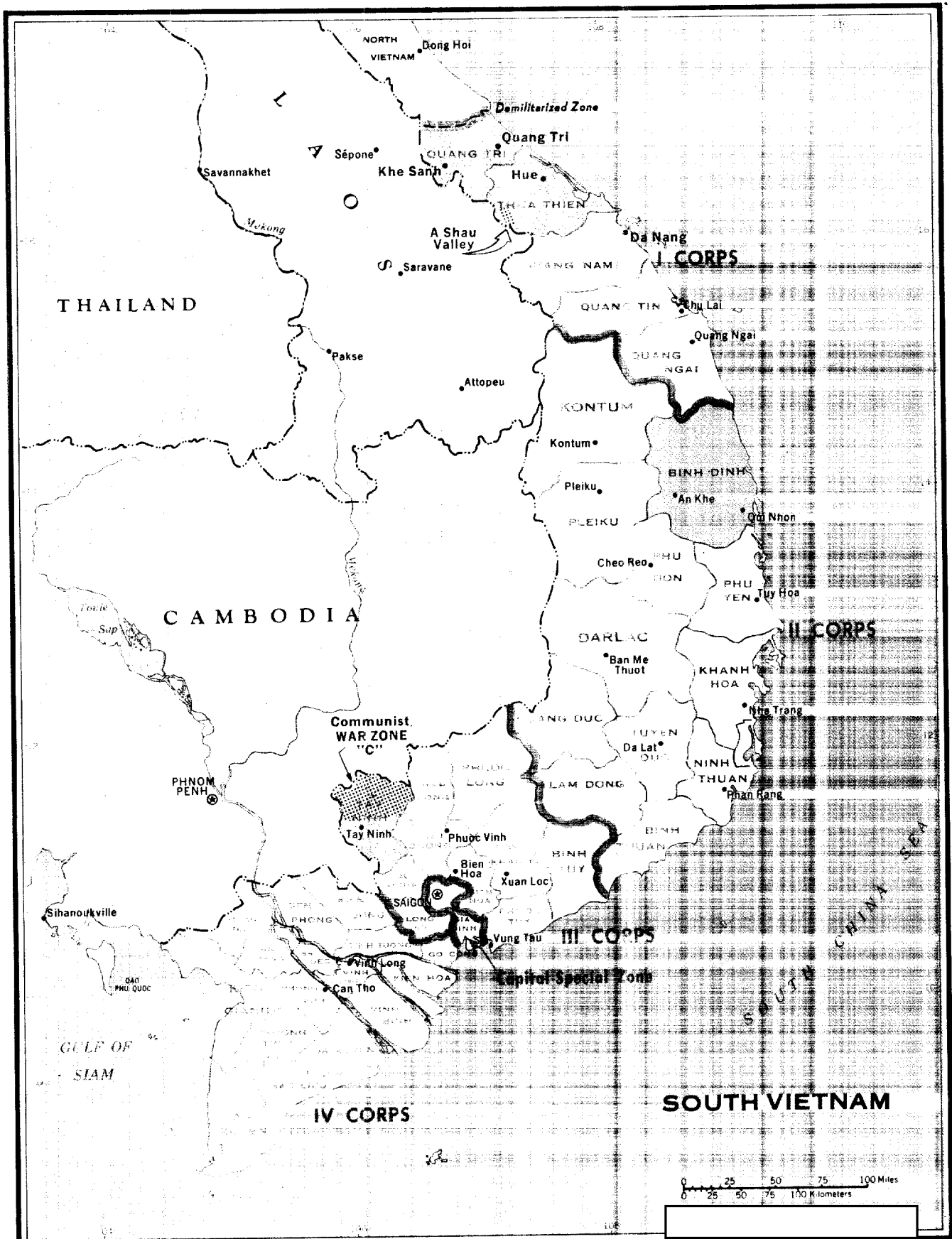
Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Research and Reports and with the Director's Special Adviser on Vietnamese Affairs.

The North Vietnamese apparently hope to keep the area insecure and to subject allied forces to substantial and sustained attrition. The impact of this attrition, Hanoi no doubt hopes, will be greatly magnified if the Communists can block any demonstrable allied progress toward winning the conflict in this sector. The situation [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] will become a "deadlock." This, Hanoi probably believes, will have a dampening effect on morale in the US and will create additional pressure against current US policy in the war.

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Although the campaign will no doubt ebb and flow as the North Vietnamese seek to replace losses and maneuver for fresh initiatives, it appears that Hanoi is prepared to maintain its strength in the area for the indefinite future, and possibly believes it can match a considerable increase in allied ground strength in this region should it occur. As many as five division-size enemy forces may now be involved in the build-up.



Background of the Build-up

1. Viet Cong activities were conducted on a relatively small scale in the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien until early 1964, despite the accessibility of the area to North Vietnam. The strength of the regular Communist military forces in the area was probably below 2,000 men, comprising no more than six battalions. The bulk of the infiltrators sent to build up Viet Cong main forces were moved to units and new formations farther south. Although government influence in the hinterlands was spotty--even negligible in some areas--security was relatively good in the coastal lowlands and vulnerable mainly to sporadic guerrilla harassment.

2. Hanoi, at the time, seemed anxious to avoid disturbing the basic neutrality of the DMZ and thus the possibility of facing retaliation across it. Although the Communists had developed infiltration routes through the far western edge of the DMZ, they apparently were satisfied with their main infiltration corridor through Laos into base complexes along the South Vietnamese border. The enemy's primary strategy, moreover, involved the development of major military pressure on government forces and facilities in the politically and economically more important southern area of the country. Once the government had more than it would handle in this area, an influx into the far north would help materially in tipping the scales toward a Communist victory.

3. In Hanoi's view, the time for this latter move apparently seemed right by mid-1964. Diem was out and instability, as a result of Communist military pressure, was steadily accelerating in both the political and military components of the Saigon government. In May 1964, it was revealed that ethnic North Vietnamese draftees had been infiltrating Quang Tri and Thua Thien to form new main force battalions. Reinforcement continued steadily through the rest of the year and into 1965. By the end of 1965, estimates of Communist strength in the two northern provinces ran from 4,000 to 6,000 regulars, plus 3,000 guerrillas. The enemy military structure which has since become the "Northern Front"--the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)

6th Regiment, plus four battalions--was already considered "probable" in US order-of-battle holdings.

4. The inability of the government forces to meet the threat in the north while heavily engaged in the southern part of the country was clearly evident by early 1965. US Marine combat units subsequently were deployed to the area to bolster the government position. The Communists responded by attempting to bottle up US forces through extensive guerrilla harassment, thus hoping to slow the re-expansion of allied influence into the hinterlands. Although hampered, US units together with the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) did make substantial gains in improving security in the coastal lowlands.

New Strategy

5. In late 1965, the Hanoi central committee met to assess the progress of the war in the South and the success of the Communists in meeting the challenge posed by US combat troops. Despite the heavy casualties already taken by NVA regulars in their opening engagements with US forces, the central committee called for their continued introduction and for their use as the main mobile striking force in South Vietnam. On the basis of this decision, it was almost inevitable that the enemy would try further to augment his strength in northern I Corps using regular NVA units.

6. The timing of their introduction was probably influenced primarily by the Buddhist "struggle movement" which erupted in Hue and Da Nang in March 1966. The Communists evidently had been aware of the growing restiveness among militant Buddhists who, from late 1965 on, were looking for an issue with which to challenge the military regime in Saigon.

described efforts by Viet Cong agents to exploit dissatisfaction among Hue students and other potential tools of Buddhist agitators. Prisoners and defectors taken during the initial Communist incursions across the DMZ in the summer of 1966 reported that they began their preparations for deployment about March.

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7. When the "struggle" actually broke out over the convenient issue of I Corps commander Thi's dismissal, it attracted significant support among government officials, police, and soldiers in the Corps area and gave the agitation the character of a regional conflict against Saigon's domination. The Communists may have believed that with the use of sufficient force, they could significantly contribute to the deterioration of government authority in I Corps and be in the position to pick up the pieces should Saigon's reaction fail. Successful exploitation of this situation would necessarily involve rapid movement which could only be accomplished via the DMZ. In Hanoi's view, the advantages of massively violating the zone now apparently outweighed its value as a defensive shield to North Vietnam.

8. The Buddhist strife was largely contained between mid-May and late June--before the NVA units could fully deploy into the Quang Tri area. Nevertheless, the situation argued for a continued follow-through by NVA regulars, since the Communist cadre and units already on the scene had proved relatively ineffective in their efforts to exploit the unrest. In addition, the Ky regime had moved quickly to stiffen and expand its authority in the northern I Corps area, partly by the appointment of tough, loyal officials to key jobs.

9. Moreover, apart from the internal situation in the northern provinces, Hanoi apparently felt increasing concern during this period over the security of its vital supply routes to South Vietnam via Laos. These routes had come increasingly under air attack and small-scale ground probes had started against them. Hanoi propaganda in the early months of 1966 had occasionally mentioned the possibility of a US ground thrust across Laos to cordon off the North from the South. Trans-DMZ military operations by the North Vietnamese would permit the development of a staging area with short supply lines for the mounting of sustained operations in the two northern provinces and southward or eastward from them, thus greatly complicating any allied ground move to choke off infiltration.

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10. It seems doubtful now that the enemy's initial intention was to seek out US forces in major engagements in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] indicates that the North Vietnamese hoped to conceal their initial deployment from the allies. Moreover, it appears that they intended initially to operate mainly in the eastern foothills and nearby lowlands of the north-south mountain ridge down to Route 9. No major US forces were stationed in this area at the time. The enemy aim seemed mainly to be the bolstering of the local Viet Cong position, preparatory to more major actions at a later date.

Crossing the DMZ

11. Enemy units began the move into Quang Tri in May 1966, with elements of the North Vietnamese 324th Division leading the way. By July, all three regiments of the division plus support units had crossed the DMZ. Despite their stealth, their presence was soon evident. Although a Marine reaction force hit them hard and inflicted heavy casualties, the North Vietnamese continued to commit troops to the effort. [REDACTED]

12. By September, after some hard fighting, it was evident that at least two battalions of the NVA 341st Division were reinforcing North Vietnamese units. In all, the North Vietnamese apparently committed the better part of four regiments to the effort. Despite their action, they failed to achieve a firm toehold south of the DMZ. On two occasions prior to October, most of the units were compelled to retreat into the DRV for rest, replacement, and regroupment. Although units of at least company size remained in Quang Tri conducting intelligence and reconnaissance operations, they were contacted only sporadically by allied units from October to the end of 1966.

Hanoi's View of the Action

13. Although their losses had been heavy, the North Vietnamese leaders apparently did not view their 1966 adventure across the DMZ as a total failure. The course of the action had demonstrated that the deployment of a Marine reaction force to meet them had been largely at the expense of Marine-supported pacification efforts farther south--a response which considerably lightened the pressure on local Communist elements from Hue to Da Nang. US forces also had to be pulled up from III Corps to meet the growing Communist threat. Moreover, the attrition rate inflicted on US elements in the northern engagements had been at least as favorable to the Communists as in many major confrontations farther south.

14. From II Corps southward, in fact, allied offensive actions were steadily building up steam and, in a series of operations from coastal Binh Dinh to War Zone C in Tay Ninh by the end of 1966, Communist main forces had been hard hit. The enemy may have been reaching the point where input to his regulars in II and III Corps was little more than keeping even with his losses. Moreover, there had been extensive disruption of Communist logistic systems in II and III Corps, thus restricting the length and scope of possible operations by some Communist units. Looked at in this light, the Communists badly needed another pressure point on the allies which would give their regulars from II Corps southward a breather.

15. The situation, in short, seemed definitely to call for a further probe across the DMZ, perhaps with slightly altered tactics and an improved strategic plan.

New Border Crossings

16. Beginning in January 1967, North Vietnamese forces in the DMZ area were extensively realigned and augmented.

[REDACTED]

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[redacted] The purpose of the added firepower almost certainly was to reduce the maneuverability of US Marines as they reacted to NVA penetrations. Heavy mortar attacks on Marine forward headquarters and bivouacs, Hanoi probably hoped, would hamper the speed and aggressiveness of Marine reaction forces. Elements of these NVA forces again began to move south of the DMZ in January. By the end of April, the deployment probably involved at least three regiments of the 324th and 341st Divisions and possibly other regimental or smaller units of two other divisional-level organizations which Hanoi had moved into the area. [redacted]

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[redacted] Recently captured North Vietnamese soldiers from the battle around Khe Sanh claim that three regiments of the 325th NVA Division moved into western Quang Tri and the adjacent area of Laos in March and April. [redacted]

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17. It appears, however, that in any case Hanoi plans to hold a substantial force in reserve just north of the DMZ, both for defensive purposes and for deployment south as needed--perhaps as a quick reaction/exploitation force.

18. US forces promptly moved again against the incoming enemy units in an effort to trap and destroy them or drive them out of the two northern provinces. The Communists proved harder to find and pinpoint, however, probably because of some new tactics and strategy on their part. [redacted]

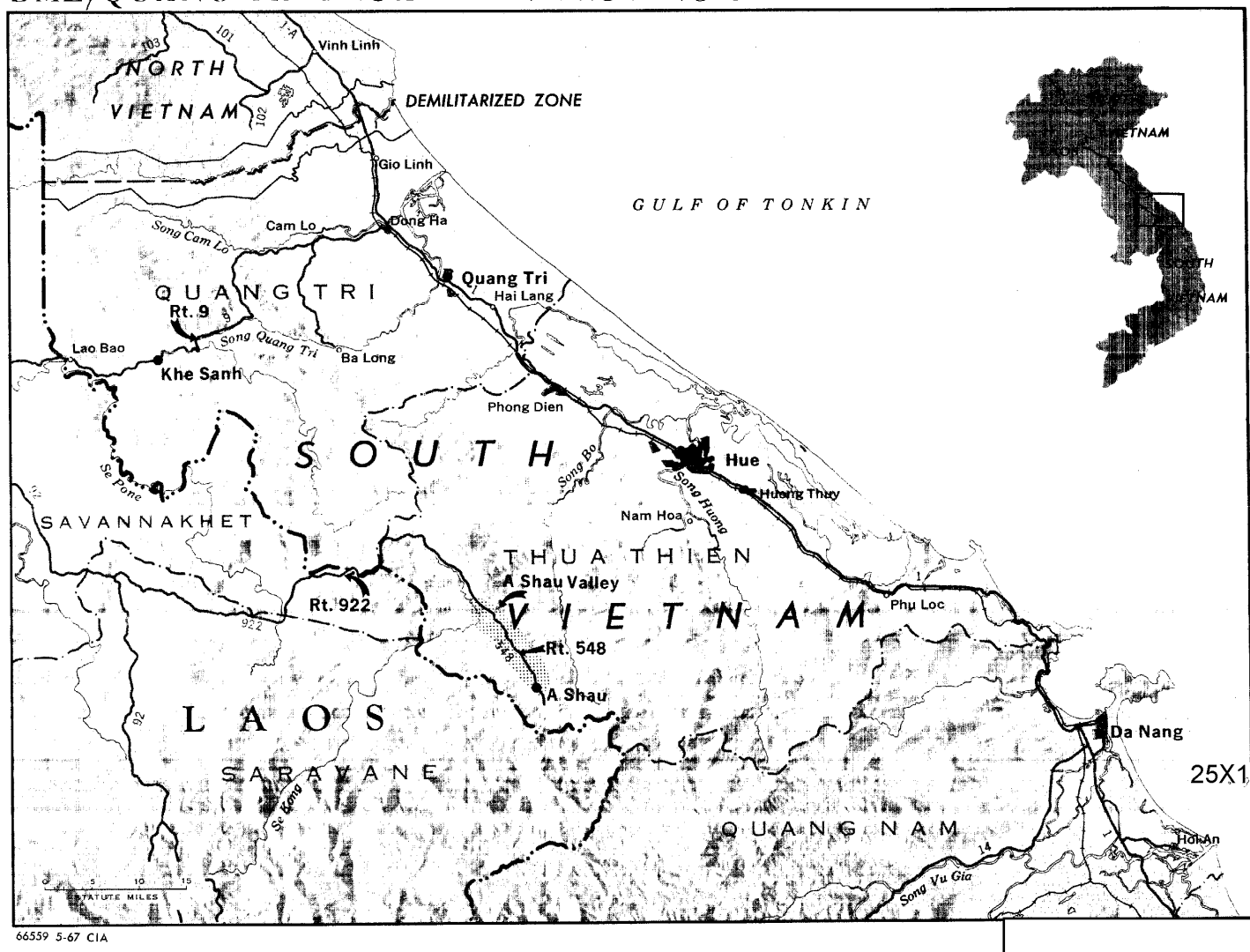
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[redacted] they are maneuvering now in smaller elements which are more difficult to detect. Link-up in large elements is made mainly for occasional offensive forays, often in conjunction with local guerrilla and main force units. The enemy elements, moreover, are apparently spread out over a larger area than before, particularly westward along the DMZ.

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DMZ/QUANG TRI-THUA THIEN PROVINCES



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19. In addition, the enemy appears intent this time on developing not only an east-west axis against the allies south of the DMZ, but also a north-south axis extending below Route 9 at least to the A Shau Valley area through the mountainous backbone of Quang Tri and Thua Thien (see map). The North Vietnamese apparently hope that pressure on the allies at one or several points along these lines will ease the reaction to North Vietnamese operations throughout the area. This was probably the enemy intention, in part, in the series of actions since 24 April 1967 in the vicinity of the US Marine outpost at Khe Sanh. By threatening the perimeter of the camp, the North Vietnamese pulled in several of the limited number of Marine reaction battalions, inflicting substantial casualties on them in return for heavy Communist losses. The enemy appears capable of mounting a sustained threat around the Khe Sanh area, thus necessitating a continued protective deployment by the limited allied reaction elements.

The Build-up Along the North-South Axis

20. There have been numerous [] reports of infiltration into western Quang Tri and Thua Thien since January 1967. []

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[] Extensive bunkering and automatic weapons emplacements have recently been discovered along the Laos - Quang Tri border near Route 9.

21. Farther south, there have been numerous reports [] that the Communists are reinforcing an extensive base complex near Route 922 in the Laos border area. In early March, ground observers reported the presence of an estimated enemy regiment in this area.

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B-52 bombing raids against this base have resulted in an unusually high number of secondary explosions--an indication of extensive enemy stockpiling of ammunition and POL. There has also been considerable road construction. Route 922 has been extended across the Vietnamese border to join Route 548 into the A Shau Valley of western Thua Thien. Truck traffic has been observed along the length of this extension. Other road and trail improvement is also under way in the valley which may be intended to support Communist forces operating to the east and south.

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Communist Capabilities and Intentions

23. Hanoi evidently feels its present strategy will put it in a strong position to mount a sustained series of engagements against allied forces in northern I Corps. There have been numerous indications

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[redacted] that the Communists plan a "summer campaign." One former NVA officer has stated that enemy plans call for a gradual increase in the size of attacking forces, moving to regimental and divisional operations by early summer. There is good evidence that this campaign will embrace all of I Corps, although the major offensive capability is now poised against the northern two provinces.

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24. The development of the offensive will probably be affected considerably by the damage sustained as a result of allied counteractions. The losses inflicted on the NVA at Khe Sanh, for example, could restrict future Communist thrusts.

25. Technically the enemy forces are conceded the capability to attack Quang Tri from the DMZ area with up to four NVA divisions, or to hit the provincial capitals in division strength. It appears,

however, in view of their traditionally cautious patterns of operation that they will be unwilling to risk a single concentrated offensive--and thus a single, overwhelming defeat--unless a particular target offers unusually favorable opportunities. They are more likely to continue tactics of maneuver over a wide area, coordinating large-scale operations with guerrilla activities while taking heavy losses, if necessary, in an effort to inflict substantial casualties on the allies. The Communists will, in addition, be relying on their improved firepower to launch mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks where possible. This tactic offers the possibility of inflicting substantial losses on military targets at relatively small cost.

26. The renewed NVA thrust into northern I Corps has been accompanied by a repetition of statements from Hanoi that the Communists are, in effect, digging in for a long war. They appear to have gained additional confidence during the last few months in their ability to withstand current levels of allied military pressure and in their capacity to outlast the US in a test of will on the war. If they can inflict substantial damage on the allies in northern I Corps, it will undoubtedly be an important element in buttressing their confidence. Hanoi probably estimates that allied casualties here--especially if inflicted in a series of battles which, from the allied standpoint, are inconclusive in cutting the enemy threat--will have a dampening effect on morale in the US, thus creating additional pressure against current US policy on the war.

Comparative Force Strengths in the Northern Provinces

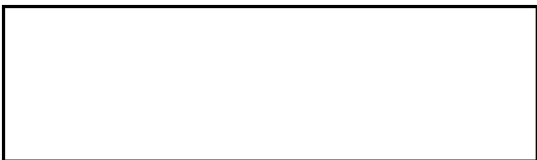
27. Although the exact number of enemy forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien is by no means clear, the ratio between allied and Communist forces is probably considerably less favorable to the Communists than at any time in the recent past. A realistic assessment of enemy main force strength must necessarily take into account those NVA units within and immediately north of the DMZ which could rapidly deploy to the South. Including estimated forces of this nature, allied units in Quang Tri and Thua

Thien face some 40,000 regular Communist troops, in addition to an estimated 13,000 Viet Cong irregulars.

28. Approximately 75,000 US Marines spearhead the available allied force for the far northern provinces. Some 35,000 of them comprise a combat maneuver component of 18 infantry and four artillery battalions. The balance are members of the Marine logistics command, aircraft wing, headquarters and headquarters service support. Some of the latter are engaged directly in combat support. Rounding out the allied main force structure available for duty in the northern provinces at present are some 30,000 ARVN troops--including 16,500 in 31 infantry and three airborne maneuver battalions--and 4,500 troops from the South Korean 2nd Marine Brigade based at Chu Lai. Approximately 50,000 of the allied forces above are now based in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Eight battalions of US Army infantry, comprising some 6,600 men, are also based at Chu Lai, and presumably could be moved to the far northern provinces, if needed.

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